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Mongolia's Strategic Partnership with India: The Third Neighbour Policy and Beyond



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Abstract

Following the collapse of its trusted ally, the USSR, Mongolia faced significant challenges in aligning itself within the new global order. As a result, Mongolia's external and internal strategic environment compelled the nomadic nation to establish and maintain friendly relations with major powers other than China and Russia. Mongolia has since attempted to diversify its diplomatic and strategic reach in regional and international forums that had previously been overshadowed by Mongolia's previous patron, the Soviet Union. Mongolia had adopted two distinct policies, namely the 'Good Neighbor Policy' and the 'Third Neighbor Policy', which outlined Mongolia's aspirations in the post-Cold War global order. This paper will attempt to understand the changes and continuities in Mongolian foreign policy as a result of Mongolia's 'Third Neighbour Policy,' as well as to investigate the possibility of mutual cooperation between India and Mongolia. The most important aspect of this research is identifying Mongolia's relevant security issues. This study will use empirical data to examine Mongolia's security dilemma, but the analysis will be qualitative. The study's findings show that, despite its small power status, Mongolia will play an important role in North Asian great power politics due to its geostrategic location and mineral resources. Given China's dominance and Western powers' counter-dominance initiatives, this assumption is becoming true. With this in mind, India started to transform its spiritual partnership with Mongolia into a comprehensive strategic one.

Keywords: *Debt diplomacy, good neighbor strategy, third neighbor policy, north asia, comprehensive strategic partnership*

Introduction

Following its democratisation in the 1990s, the People's Republic of Mongolia, one of Asia's sparsely

populated nations has determined to transform itself from a landlocked to a land-linked cosmopolitan (Bulag, 2010). Mongolia controlled the heartland of Central Asia following the establishment of the Mongol Empire in

1206, and by the late 13th century, the Mongol empire had spread from the Pacific Ocean in the east to the Danube River and the Persian Gulf coasts in the west, making it the world's largest contiguous land empire (Editors of Britannica Encyclopaedia, 2021). Following the death of Chinggis Khan and with the power consolidation of China's Qing dynasty, Mongolia was annexed into the Chinese empire until Mongolia's independence from the Republic of China in 1921. During the Cold War, Mongolia was a client state of the USSR and its foreign policy was overseen by the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Mongolia faced significant challenges in aligning itself within the new global order following the collapse of its trusted ally, the USSR. Furthermore, the Mongolian economy had experienced negative growth for a brief period of time, and Mongolia faced serious external security threats from its immediate neighbour China. As a consequence, Mongolia's external and internal strategic environment prompted the nomadic nation to build and maintain friendly relationships with major powers apart from China and Russia. Since then, Mongolia has attempted to diversify its own diplomatic and strategic reach in

regional and international forums which had previously been overshadowed by Mongolia's previous patron, the USSR. Mongolia had adopted two distinct policies, namely the strategy of good neighbours and the strategy of Third Neighbors, which outlined Mongolia's aspirations in the post-Cold War global order. Mongolia's good neighbour policy seeks to strike a balance between its two powerful neighbours, Russia and China (Kumar & Chatterjee, 2021). Mongolia's Third Neighbours Policy, on the other hand, is a strategy for developing bilateral and multilateral cooperation with highly developed democratic countries in the political, economic, and cultural spheres (Sanalkhundev, 2021). The paper highlights India's strategic engagements in Mongolia and traces the future trajectory of bilateral relations between the two nations, beginning with a brief overview of Mongolia's "Third Neighbour" Policy.

Theoretical Framework

This paper investigates Realist position on small power such as Mongolia and its importance in regional power politics. Power, according to realists, is a determining factor in global politics and distribution of power determines

how states interact with each other. In general, realism in international relations and foreign policy formulation has an inherent bias toward studying great powers. However, since the Cold War's end, the concept of power has shifted from material to nonmaterial dimensions (Galal, 2020). According to realism small states tend to engage in balancing behaviour that maintains the international status quo; small states are not in a position to be revisionist states (Simpson, 2018). As a result, such a shift has had an impact on the foreign policies of small states. Small states, according to realists, are more vulnerable to external shocks and dangers. As a result, studying small powers in global politics is only possible and desirable in the context of their interactions with larger powers. Small states, opposed to the realist doctrine of satellite states, can become important players in global politics in the post-Cold War era due to their geopolitical and geoeconomic leverages (Baitha & Chatterjee, 2022). This is why, despite its small power status, Mongolia will play an important role in North Asian great power politics due to its geostrategic position and mineral assets. Given China's dominance and the counter-dominance initiatives led by Western powers, this assumption is

becoming true. Keeping this in mind, India began to transform its spiritual partnership with Mongolia into a comprehensive strategic one.

Research Methods

China's dominance in North Asia has evolved to the point where it now determines Mongolia's external and internal policies. Mongolia, on the other hand, aspires to form close strategic alliances with India to escape China's debt trap. This paper will attempt to understand the changes and continuities in Mongolian foreign policy as a result of Mongolia's 'Third Neighbour Policy,' as well as to explore the potential for mutual cooperation between India and Mongolia. The most important aspect of this research is identifying the relevant security issues in Mongolia. To aid this comprehension, this study will examine Mongolia's security dilemma using empirical data, but the analysis will be qualitative. This study has used both primary and secondary sources, e-resources, and news articles.

Considering the pragmatism introduced by Mongolia's 'Third Neighbour Policy' and India's 'Act East Policy' this study has tried to uncover the following questions.

1. Why Mongolia's 'Third Neighbour' approach is perceived as a balancing act between India and Russia?
2. How Mongolia's 'Third Neighbour' approach is going to help India to extend its sphere in North Asia?
3. What are the major changes and challenges taking place in India's North Asia and Mongolia's 'Third Neighbour' approach?

Results and Discussion

The presentation and discussion of results is included in this section.

Defining Mongolia's Third Neighbours Policy

Mongolia's landlocked position between China and Russia, as well as its excessive dependence on the USSR during the socialist period, constrained and limited Mongolia's diplomatic reach beyond its immediate neighborhood. The fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, on the other hand, created favourable conditions for Mongolia to pursue a foreign policy based on realism and the priority of its national interests (Mongolian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1994). Mongolia anticipated the need to

restructure and reform its political, social, and economic structure to cope with the new liberal world order in the absence of critical Soviet support. Mongolia's Foreign Policy Concept (1994) emphasised Mongolia's ambitions to develop deeper engagements with major powers and to strengthen Mongolia's position in the global community by establishing a network of political, economic, and other relationships in the post-cold war era. According to the core principles of the Foreign Policy concept, Mongolia will take a balanced approach toward the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, taking into account Mongolia's historical and civilisational ties with its immediate neighbours. Furthermore, in the Post-Soviet global order, Mongolia will prioritise the establishment of friendly relations with highly developed Western and Eastern countries such as the United States of America, Japan, Germany, India, and others (Mongolian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1994). In short, Mongolia's Third Neighbours Policy is based on assumptions of the uncertainty and complex strategic environment which necessitates a careful use of diplomatic, informational, and economic means (Sanalkhundev, 2021).

The term "Third Neighbour" was coined by then US Secretary of State James A. Baker during his official visit to Mongolia in the 1990s. Baker defined this strategy as a rhetorical gesture by the Mongolian nation to complement Mongolia's transition to democracy from socialism (Dorjjugder, 2016). Subsequently the concept of third neighbours was incorporated in Mongolia's foreign policy concept and constitution. The rationale of the "Third Neighbor" approach is based on the survival and the security of a territorial buffer like Mongolia to overcome geopolitical rivalry of two neighbouring great powers and to adopt pragmatism in Mongolia's foreign policy discourse. As argued by Soni (2020) three major developments influenced Mongolian external engagement from 2000s onwards. First, China has become Mongolia's largest investor and trading partner in 2000 posing new concerns about China's growing economic influence in Mongolia. Second, following President Putin's visit to Mongolia in 2000, Russia re-engaged in the country to counter China's influence. Third, President Bush's 2005 visit to Mongolia opens up new avenues for closer cooperation with the US and other democracies to counterbalance

China's influence in North Asia (Soni, 2020).

Although Mongolia's "third neighbours" policy emphasises on developing cordial relations with both Western and Eastern democracies, India's role is critical due to shared history and democratic values i.e., India is the largest democracy and Mongolia is the youngest democracy in Asia). In this context, India has committed to itself invest and cooperate with Mongolia in the areas of defense, technology, mining etc. India's engagement with Mongolia under the "Third Neighbours" policy and "Connect Central Policy" are therefore based on strategic counter-balance against China in in India's extended neighbourhood of Central Asia South-East Asia and North Asia (Kumar & Chatterjee, 2021).

India-Mongolia: The Spiritual Neighbours

The historical factors between India and Mongolia remain pivotal to understand the contemporary trajectory between the two nations. India and Mongolia have shared ancient civilizational ties via old silk route which determined Mongolia's engagements with India in the

subsequent times. Millett (2009) argues India's historic ties with Mongolia dates back to 2000 to 3000 years ago. Historical and cultural ties are further consolidated with the wider dissemination of Indian literatures such as Mahabharata, India's traditional medicine and Buddhism. Buddhism, Mongolia's dominant religion entered the country around the 5th century A.D. and was later spread throughout the Mongolia by Tibetan monks, establishing further religious ties between the two nations (Nyamdavaa, 2004). The establishment of the Nalanda University, an ancient centre of learning for Mongolian monks in India, improved civilisational contact significantly during the 5th century A.D. (Yadav, 2015). Because of these cultural interactions, holy books from India, such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, have been included in Mongolian literature, as have other famous stories from India, such as Bhoja and Vikramaditya, and Indian literary works, particularly Godan, Gaban, Kamasutra, and Shakuntala (Gupta, 2010 as cited in Yadav, 2015).

Thus, Mongol-Indian relations are ancient and based on shared history, values and traditions. Due to these historical and cultural convergences

between the two nations India and Mongolia are referred as "spiritual neighbours" (Nyamdavaa, 2004). Furthermore, India's historical ties with Mongolia have aided India in strengthening bilateral relations with Mongolia, especially since the country's democratic transition in the 1990s. Today, India is regarded as an important power capable of providing assistance to Mongolia to expand its own sphere of influence beyond Russia and China. This is one of the main reasons why, despite physical barriers, Mongolia is eager to engage with India bilaterally and through active participation in various international and regional forums. On the other hand, Mongolia's strategic location and vast resource potential will enhance India's position in Northeast Asia.

Relevance of Mongolia in India's Foreign Policy Discourse

Mongolia's importance in Indian foreign policy discourse stems from its geopolitical location between two superpowers, as well as its vast yet untapped domestic market. During the cold war, Mongolia's market interactions were limited, and FDI into the country came primarily from the

USSR and its allies. Mongolia experienced significant domestic economic growth following the Cold War, and at one point was the world's fastest growing economy. With the tremendous rise in consumer goods demand and the expansion of Mongolia's industrial sector, the country has begun to diversify its economy. Mongolia had adopted a liberal model of long-term growth and had begun to strengthen ties with major capitalist powers in exchange for technological and financial assistance. Mongolia intends to develop vital sectors such as education, science and technology, mining, and energy infrastructure using a soft-power approach to international relations as a mode of operation under the "Third Neighbor approach" (Lkhaajav, 2021). Mongolia's aspirations are similar to India's "Extended Neighbourhood Policy" in this case. Following the 1990s, Indian governments, whether led by the BJP or the Congress Party, have prioritised the concept of India's neglected extended neighbourhood. The concept of extended neighbourhood entails India projecting its hard power (military and economic projection) as well as soft power (cultural and ideological strands) by developing stronger ties with countries other than India's immediate

South Asian neighbours (Scott, 2009). As a result, India's extended neighbourhood has become its conceptual umbrella, requiring an omnidirectional 360-degree view of the opportunities available to India outside of South Asia by looking eastwards, southwards, northwards, and westwards (Raja Mohan & Khanna, 2006 as cited in Scott, 2009). In the case of Mongolia, India's interests are multifaceted, based on geostrategic calculations, increased energy and economic cooperation, and the need to counter Chinese assertiveness in the northeast Asian region.

Establishment of Diplomatic Relations and Further Engagements between India & Mongolia

Even though India's had shared historical and cultural ties with Mongolia the diplomatic relations between the two countries was officially established in 1955. India was the first country outside the Soviet bloc to establish diplomatic relations with Mongolia. By doing so India was recognised as a "spiritual neighbour," a "third neighbour," a "strategic partner," and a pilgrimage centre for the Mongolian state (Ministry of Indian

External Affairs, 2020). Subsequently after India's independence in 1947, Mongolia played a key role and attended the first ever The Asian Conference which was held in Delhi and the two countries established preliminary contacts (Miliate, 2009). In 1961 India was among the very few countries who supported Mongolia's inclusion in the United Nations. Mongolia reciprocated India's initiative by co-sponsoring the famous UN Resolution recognising Bangladesh as an independent country along with Bhutan in 1971. Mongolia also appreciates India's support for its admission to the non-aligned movement (NAM) as a full member in 1991 (Ministry of Indian External Affairs, 2020). India's relationship with Mongolia has changed considerably since 1973, when the two nations signed an eight-point joint declaration that served as the foundation for bilateral cooperation. The Treaty of Friendly Relations and Cooperation was signed in 1994 during a visit by Mongolian President Ochirbat, and it was followed by joint declarations in 2001, 2004, and 2009. (Ananth, 2015). In the years since, India and Mongolia have had several high-profile visits, with both countries focusing on bilateral agreements and cooperation in fields

such as science, technology, education, defence, agriculture, and so on. India-Mongolia relations have improved significantly since Mongolia's democratic transition in 1991 and the implementation of Mongolia's "third neighbour policy." India was recognised as an important partner in Mongolia's development and an ally in the post-Soviet world order under the distinct concept of "third neighbour" policy. After the 1990s, the Mongolia-India relationship has been particularly focused on a wide range of issues that are of mutual interest to both countries. These ties are concentrated in a variety of industries, with information technology, education, biotechnology, agriculture, pharmacy, and mining and other natural resources, and cultural ties etc. (Miliate, 2009).

Economic and Energy Co-operation

In the twenty-first century, India's focus in Mongolia is on economic and energy cooperation rather than reminiscing about the historical past. There are several reasons for this. India is one of the world's fastest growing economies, and it needs to ensure its energy security to achieve and maintain a sustainable economic growth. In

general, India relies on MENA countries for essential energy resources. Mongolia, on the other hand, has an abundance of untapped energy resource potential, making it the cheapest alternative option for India. Mongolia, on the other hand, is attempting to become the Northeast Asia's energy hub following its democratisation. In this regard, Mongolia hopes to use India's technological and scientific expertise to export its abundant resources throughout Asia. Therefore, under Mongolia's "Third Neighbour" and India's "Extended Neighbourhood" policy both countries share goals which are of mutual interests. Furthermore, to analysis India's economic interests in Mongolia in the Post-Soviet era it's a prerequisite to understand the economic situation in Mongolia. Since Mongolia's independence, the USSR exerted immense control over Mongolia in cultural, political and economic sphere. Since 1921 until the fall of the USSR, majority of Mongolia's bilateral trade were conducted with the USSR. The Soviet financial assistance to Mongolia is so massive that it cannot be considered in normal terms of foreign aid. Mongolia, on the other hand, is a political investment for Moscow to control the rise of China in North Asia (Bradsher, 1972). Furthermore, it was

only with the help of USSR, Mongolia was able to make transition from agrarian economy to industrial one. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, Mongolia adopted market economy, multi-pillar diplomacy and emphasising the policy of third neighbours. Following the 1990s, China has emerged as Mongolia's most important trading partner and export destination. China-Mongolia relations were elevated from "strategic partnership" in 2011 to "comprehensive strategic partnership" during Chinese Premier Xi Jinping's official visit in 2014. Furthermore, China promised Mongolia access to Chinese seaports and railway networks for goods transport. Both countries have recently agreed to collaborate on medical care, education, railroads, and other infrastructure development. In terms of bilateral trade, both countries expect to spend \$10 billion in 2020. More importantly, while Mongolia has agreed to join China's Silk Road Economic Belt, Beijing has invited Ulaanbaatar to the APEC meeting (Bhattacharya, 2014). As of 2020, India's export to Mongolia is \$31.5 million. Majority of India's exports are related with pharmaceuticals, automobile parts and technological Equipments. Compared to China India's exports to Mongolia are

marginal. However, India's export to Mongolia has increased significantly from \$2.03 million in 1995 to \$31.5 million in 2020 (Lawford, 2020). Mongolia's third-neighbor policy further allows India and other countries to explore previously unexplored areas. In terms of India's energy security, Mongolia has the potential to play an important role in meeting energy demands. Due to the country's lack of infrastructure, significant natural resources in Mongolia have not been fully surveyed and utilised. Oil, gold, silver, iron, coal, copper, molybdenum, tungsten, phosphates, tin, nickel, zinc, and fluorspar are among the abundant natural resources in Mongolia (Kumar & Chatterjee, 2021). To control Chinese hegemony in Mongolia and to have a presence in North Asia, India has already ventured in various projects in Mongolia. Nomadic Elephant, a joint military exercise between India and Mongolia, has been taking place since 2006 to strengthen the partnership between the Indian and Mongolian Armed Forces. In 2015, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the country, becoming the first Indian prime minister to do so, and signed a number of agreements in various sectors, including a \$ 1 billion Line of Credit to develop an oil refinery (South Asia

Monitor, 2021). During this visit PM Modi emphasized on historical ties between the two nations which were followed several high-level visits from both sides. India has clearly begun to recognise not only Mongolia's geopolitical importance, but also India's desire to reduce Chinese influence in trade and the energy sector in Mongolia. The ancient civilizational ties with Mongolia therefore provided India a platform to engage in a more proactive foreign policy with China's neighbour. It is now critical for India to become more than just spiritual neighbours to Mongolia, but also a strategic ally and regional partner.

Conclusion

Mongolia's successful transition to democracy in the 1990s benefited India in terms of India's reach in Central Asia's extended neighbourhood. In today's world order, India's approach to Mongolia is based on geostrategic and geoeconomic factors, as well as a desire to counterbalance China in North and South East Asia. Mongolia is an important strategic partner for India under the "Third Neighbour policy," and both countries are participating and interacting in multilateral forums such as APEC, SCO, and the Central Asian

Dialogue on a regular basis. Over the years India-Mongolia relations have progressed from spiritual neighbour to strategic partnership, reflecting the realism of India's foreign policy discourse. India has increased its engagement with China's neighbours under PM Modi's leadership, transforming the 'Look East Policy' into the 'Act East Policy', deeper engagements with Mongolia are a new addition into it. As a result, during the Covid 19 pandemic, India supplied approximately 150,000 AstraZeneca vaccines, with nearly 100,000 doses arriving in Mongolia via COVAX. Therefore, India's Vaccine diplomacy in Mongolia aided India in strengthening its soft power assets while expanding opportunities to engage in Mongolia's mineral market. India aspires to change the power equation in North Asian politics, based on its manufacturing potential. Using Vaccine diplomacy, India has been more or less successful in instilling hope among political leaders and Mongolian citizens in general, while the global media has portrayed China as an irresponsible power.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that no potential conflict of interest exists.

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